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Drawing Lessons from Dissolution of Czechoslovakia in Addressing Possible Brexit Implications

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Abstract

It may appear there are hardly two other states that could be more different from each other than it is in the case of Czechoslovakia and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, however in hindsight of the latest development after the Brexit referendum and before triggering the notorious Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty there could be some lessons drawn from the former development after the collapse of the Communist bloc setting into motion huge political changes in Europe from the perspective of dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, United Kingdom, state, dissolution

Introduction

In my academic career, there are two states I look up to most: thanks to a huge political change, the first one does not exist anymore and the second one´s existence is currently being challenged as a result of another huge political change. The two states I am going to talk about are Czechoslovakia and the United Kingdom.

Born in the early 80´s in Czechoslovakia and after the Velvet Revolution in 1989 removing the communist regime from power in the country I was able to watch the further development of political and cultural relations between two nations who shared a common state for almost 70 years (69; 75 respectively). I had the opportunity to see and experience immense political changes after the collapse of the Communist bloc resulting in dissolution of not only the Soviet Union itself, but another states of the bloc such as Yugoslavia and of course, Czechoslovakia.

As an eager student of international relations interested in British politics and having visited Britain several times, I noticed some resemblance between Slovak and Scottish (English and Czech, respectively) attitudes and their very understanding of statehood which inspired my thoughts on the likelihood of dissolution of United Kingdom after Brexit presenting a big political shift affecting Europe and further international relations.

At first, it may seem there are hardly two other states that could be more different from each other in any possible aspect one might consider, however there are intriguing similarities to be tracked down from the perspective of a possible political implication of Brexit such as the looming idea of splitting the UK.

Spotting similarities and discrepancies between Czechoslovakia and the United Kingdom

The size of Great Britain is almost twice as big as the territory of former Czechoslovakia, with rather flat-land areas of England and Wales in the south and mountainous Scotland in the north of the island. The geographical parallel with former Czechoslovakia may be seen in the fact that while the Czech territory is rather flat, Slovakia is more-less a mountainous country. Another analogy can be recognised in the size proportions of the territories. The size of England (along with Wales) with 151.174 km² is almost twice as large as Scottish territory of 80.077 km². The Czech Republic´s territory with 78.866 km² is also almost twice as sizeable as the territory of the Slovak Republic of 49.035 km².

From the perspective of the religion, the English traditionally incline to Protestantism (such as the case of the Czechs) while in Scotland the religious tendencies are rather more rigorous (such as in the case of Slovakia). Although the size of English population is almost four times bigger than Czech population of ca. 10 million people, there are more than five million Slovaks, which is similar to the size of Scottish population of ca. 4.5 million people.

Nevertheless, the main ambition of this essay is not to find as many similarities as possible, but to outline the complications and obstacles a unitary state joining diverse constituent nations may face after a significant political shift. By this shift I mean the results of Brexit referendum held in the UK on 23rd June 2016. Opting for leaving the EU the British set in motion several issues which had been only partially silenced after the 2014 Scottish independence referendum where Scotland chose to remain a part of the United Kingdom (so far).

Although a monarchy, United Kingdom is a more than 200 year old unitary state with deep roots of democratic principles of its governance. It is said to be a country which disdains revolution as a means of change (perhaps with the exception of the last revolution that took place on its territory – the Industrial Revolution). Britain never experienced a totalitarian regime, neither some 20 years of foreign military occupation. There are four state-creating nations: the English, the Scottish, the Irish and the Welsh. In this essay, I will focus on the relationship between the English and the Scottish as the two biggest nations that are most determining the political development

in their common state, although the English are being accused of too big a dominance in addressing important state matters.

Czechoslovakia was a Central European republic founded on democratic principles in 1918, after the World War II being ruled for four decades by a communist regime which was overthrown by a non-violent (!) revolution that set in motion tremendous social and political changes resulting in the very cessation of the state. It was a union of two state-creating nations: Czechs and Slovaks. Of course, one shall not forget Moravians (who are politically / practically included in the Czech nation) and other ethnic groups living on its territory such as Germans, Hungarians, Ruthenians and Jews.

The Czechoslovak idea

The ancestors of the Czechs and Slovaks were first united in the seventh century in the so-called "Samo Empire" for some thirty years and later in the Great Moravia between the years 833 and 907. In the tenth century, the Czechs controlled western Slovakia for around thirty years, but by the eleventh century the Hungarians had conquered and annexed the whole territory of Slovakia, while the Czechs maintained their own principality of Bohemia (a kingdom since 1198). Although a part of Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Bohemian Kingdom officially ceased to exist in 1918 by transformation into the Czechoslovak Republic as a democratic state.

In the past, both Czechs and Slovaks had to struggle against powerful neighbours (Germans in the case of the Czechs, Hungarians in the case of the Slovaks) and cultural contacts between Czechs and Slovaks arose again in the fifteenth century, with the campaigns of the Czech Hussite armies to Slovakia and in the seventeenth century, when Czech Protestants fled to Slovakia. Needless to say, since the late fourteenth century many representatives of Slovak intelligence studied at the Prague University. The Czechs and Slovaks were formally united from the fifteenth century until 1918, when Hungary (which then included Slovakia), Bohemia and other Central European states were ruled by the same (Habsburg) kings in Austro-Hungarian Empire. In practise, the two nations were treated differently by the ruling authorities in Vienna and Budapest. While the Czechs, belonging to the Austrian part of the Empire, were granted considerable cultural autonomy, the Slovaks were subject to rather harsh oppression from the Hungarian governance. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, Slovak intellectuals used written Czech as well as Slovak (and Latin, of course). Similarities of both languages resulted in both nations being able to understand each other without having to study one another´s language. Here lie the roots of the Czech-Slovak intercommunity.

Radicalisation of the Czechs in Austria and the Slovaks in Hungary did not take place only along the Slavic line; there was also the question of national self-determination of the Czechs and Slovaks which had two separate dimensions: on one hand it was their differentiation from the Germans and the Hungarians, on the other hand it was their differentiation from one another. As the language difference is the easiest to spot when considering national specifications, it was the linguists who played immensely substantial role on the onset of Czech and Slovak revival. (Krejčí, 2000)

Both the First Czecho-Slovak Republic founded in 1918 and its successor after the end of WWII the Czechoslovak Republic had the form of a unitary state until 1969 when it was formally declared a federation of the Czech Socialist Republic and the Slovak Socialist Republic. However, there had always been an asymmetric relationship between the Czechs and Slovaks where the Slovaks often felt they were getting the short end of the stick and the Czechs felt being somewhat superior to and therefore inhibited by the Slovaks. Despite numerous political frictions, all in all, nevertheless, their co-existence in common state was never disrupted by any violent acts.

From the very names such as Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovak Socialist Republic it is apparent that these were officially federal states, however in encounter with the very principle of a socialist rule there lies a paradox. This principle assumes the rule of the communist party above all other state authorities bringing about central decision-making authority and thus destroying the very idea of a federalist state where two or more equal states´ governances with specifically defined competences do not succumb to any higher authority – here being the Communist Party. In Czechoslovak Constitution it was the infamous Article 4 which stipulated that the leading force in the society and the state is the vanguard of the working class, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, thus standing above all other state authorities.

Dissolution of Czechoslovakia

While the dissolutions of socialist federal states such as Soviet Union and Yugoslavia were accompanied with bloodshed, it was only Czechoslovakia that accomplished its split without any violence – hence the expression "Velvet Divorce". Here is where I would like to draw attention to an exemplary settling of an international dispute between two nations on the highest level of a civilised conduct.

During the very events of the Velvet Revolution in November 1989 (in Slovak language the term "Gentle Revolution" is used) resulting in the collapse of the communist rule in Czechoslovakia first disparities between

the Czechs and Slovaks emerged concerning the understanding of proportion of the political power in the country and the competencies of its particular constituents. Not only were there two different movements against the communist regime with two different names which were established practically independent from one another (hence the two different names – Civic Forum (OF) in the Czech part and Public against Violence (VPN) in the Slovak part of the country), these two platforms launched the difference in further development of political efforts on both sides where the authority of the federal government was slowly undermined by the two national governments resulting in splitting of the common state.

At first this option did not seem to be on the table at all. In June 1990, the first democratic elections were held in both parts of the state and in July 1990 the prime ministers of both republics met to discuss the future of Czechoslovakia. The Slovak prime minister expressed the view that Slovak citizens are in favour of a common state. In October 1990 the Prime ministers Vladimír Mečiar (Slovakia), Petr Pithart (Czech Republic) and Marián Čalfa (Czechoslovakia) agreed that after the redistribution of positions between the republics a viable federation must remain in existence.

In December 1990 after long negotiations the Federal Assembly adopts amendments to the Constitutional Law on Federation no. 143/1968 Coll. – so-called Competence Act. It was a compromise on proposals of both the Czech National Council and the Slovak National Council, while strengthening the competencies of both countries.

Officially, neither the Czechs nor the Slovaks wanted the country to be dissolved and desired the continued existence of a federal Czechoslovakia. A slight majority of Slovaks, however, advocated a looser form of co-existence or complete independence and sovereignty. At first, the idea of sovereignty was only advocated by the Slovak National Party (SNS). In April 1991 Methodical-Research Cabinet of the Slovak Radio along with the Centre for Social Analysis at the Comenius University in Bratislava, published results of a survey pursuant to which 77% of the Slovak population is in favour of the common state of Czechs and Slovaks. The opinion polls in 1992 suggested that 63% of Slovaks and 64% of Czechs were still favouring the idea of one common republic.

In the years 1990–1992, different political parties re-emerged, but Czech parties had little or no presence in Slovakia, and vice versa. In order to have a functional state, the government demanded continued control from Prague, while Slovaks continued to ask for decentralization. This was a period of constant disputes and strife between Czech and the Slovak political representatives, public protests demanding either independence or unity in both parts of the country as well as several transport and education strikes.

Lengthy political negotiations saw numerous proposals of an agreement on the state organisation being turned down by one or another respective party.

The most awkward dispute, infamously named "Hyphen War", began as early as in December 1989 when the newly elected President Václav Havel announced dropping the word "Socialist" from the state´s official name and simply changing it to Czechoslovak republic (official name from 1920 to 1938 and from 1945 to 1960). Slovak politicians however suggested that it diminished Slovakia's equal status, and demanded that the country´s name be spelled with a hyphen, as it was spelled in 1918 when the (First) Czecho-Slovak Republic was founded. The Hyphen War implied a certain division in understanding of the statehood and distribution of competences between the Czech and Slovak nations.

In July 1991 as these divisions were becoming more and more obvious, the Federal Assembly agreed on a constitutional law on the referendum providing that any withdrawal of a republic from the federation may not take place other than by plebiscite. This referendum never took place, however. No law on referendum was passed as a result of complex and problematic political debates where neither Czech nor Slovak politicians seemed to find common ground with one another.

Parliamentary elections in June 1992 saw the victory of the coalition of Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Christian Democratic Party in the Czech Republic and quite a grand victory of the Movement for Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) with 37% of all votes cast. It took no longer than two days for the leaders of ODS (Václav Klaus) and HZDS (Vladimír Mečiar) to meet in Brno to begin a series of negotiations, where representatives of various delegations of the winning subjects agreed upon various conventions. So far, no one knows exactly what the two leaders discussed. Some representatives of HZDS submitted a draft of the constitutional arrangement for both countries at the level of the Union, or confederation with international subjectivity. A meeting between ODS and HZDS was held in which several participants took the view that from long-term perspective the federation is unsustainable. For these reasons Václav Klaus refused to accept the position of the prime minister, who was in charge of creating the federal government. Instead, an agreement between Klaus and Mečiar was made to form a federal government of Czechoslovakia with a temporary mandate.

On 17th July 1992 Slovak National Council adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Slovak Republic. Václav Havel resigned as president of Czechoslovakia. Following days another round of negotiations between ODS and HZDS took place. The result was an agreement on dissolution of the federation. In August Mečiar announced in the Slovak National Council that a referendum on the continued existence of the common state would be politically irresponsible.

During October and November 1992 dozens of various agreements were signed on future cooperation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, including the Customs Union agreement, Treaty of good neighbourliness, friendly relations and co-operation, six contracts in the economic field and an agreement on organising relations arising from the dissociation of the Czechoslovak army forces as well as the constitutional law on property division of the federation and its transfer to the republic(s). Federal assets were divided according to the 2:1 formula (considering the approximate ratio between the Czech and Slovak population within Czechoslovakia). On 25th November 1992 the Federal Assembly adopted a constitutional Act on the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, which came into force at midnight on 31st December 1992 to 1st January 1993. It implied the division of Czechoslovakia without a referendum.

The question why the Czech and Slovak public were excluded from the decision-making process on dissolving their common state is being answered (differently) by both camps – unionists and separatists. The advocates of separation claim that this did not happen for two main reasons. Firstly, if one country decided differently than the other one the leaving country (without mutual accord) risks losing its property. Secondly, both nations might have wanted to remain in a common state, but the question was how to arrange it? Czechoslovak unionists argue that dissolving of the republic was treason of politicians who were eager to govern their own part of the country. They argue that with the exception of SNS there were no other political parties aspiring to get seats in the parliament with the idea of splitting Czechoslovakia anchored in their electoral programme. This is why they question the very legitimacy of this act since at the time there was an immense risk to legitimise a state through politicians only. This was luckily warded off by both victorious political subjects in Czech and Slovak republics being elected once again in the following parliamentary elections in two separate states. Regarding the overall situation in Central Europe at that time there was also a looming risk of (especially) the southern territories of Slovakia being claimed by Hungary. Fortunately, these worries never came true and nowadays the relationships between the Czechs and Slovaks (and their neighbours, including the Germans and Hungarians) are at their historical peak. It is argued that the reason for such favourable friendly atmosphere between the two nations with thriving personal contacts and cultural and intellectual intercourse is the very fact that both countries are independent, since the reasons for frictions caused by centralised political decisions no longer exist. What remained is the Czech-Slovak intercommunity where the absence of political dictate strengthens and stimulates personal and cultural relationships.

Even some of those essentially favouring a common state are currently inclined to the idea that the dissolution of Czechoslovakia was not such a bad decision at the end of the day. Nevertheless, they point out that following the split there were five long years of ice-cold political relations between the two countries when the two foreign affairs ministers never met. They also suggest that splitting of a small country indicates farther vulnerability of its units.

Those in favour of the dissolution argue that from the historic point of view Central European lands have always been parts of different state units, so the dissolution of Czechoslovakia was a process quite natural for this part of Europe.

On 31st December 1992 at 12.00 p.m. Czech and Slovak Federative Republic ceased to exist. As of 1st January 1993 two independent states arose – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Their gentle and civilised split predicted an excellent start for both countries in the international community.

Both the Czech and Slovak republics had explicit conceptions of their further foreign policy and after the split the countries expressed their wish to join European structures as well as NATO and started to work towards these goals – each in their own pace and way. Although being widely recognised by the world community as two successor states of Czechoslovakia and granted their sovereignty, in Slovakia the situation became more problematic due to a divisive figure of the then Prime minister, Mečiar. Slovak efforts were hindered as illustrates the European Commission Regular Report on Slovakia´s progress towards accession in 1997: "During the period July 1997 to end September 1998 there has been is a lack of stability in the institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law and protection of human rights, as reflected by the inability to elect a President, the controversial use of the transferred presidential powers, the unsatisfactory functioning of the parliamentary committees and the disregard for the Constitutional Court rulings. There have been problems in the treatment of minorities and a lack of progress concerning the adoption of legislation on minority languages." (Regular Report, 1997)

In 1998 a new Slovak government led by Mikuláš Dzurinda re-launched admission negotiations with the EU and in 2004, eleven years after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, Slovak Republic was eventually admitted in the EU along with its brother state, Czech Republic (and eight other Central and Eastern European states).

Since joining the EU Slovakia has become a more integral part of the Union thanks to its adoption of the single currency (euro), and strong tendency to take part in the banking and fiscal unions. The Czechs, on the

other hand tend to retain a bigger part of their sovereignty manifested mainly by preserving their own currency (Czech koruna).

The similarity to be spotted here is in the Scottish willingness to stay within the EU while the English (and Welsh) part of the country is rather in favour of leaving it, clearly demonstrated by the results of the UK EU Membership Referendum in July 2016. The United Kingdom as a (future former) member state of the EU has indisputably clung to the British pound just like the Czech Republic to their koruna.

Ahead of the 2016 referendum the First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon said the Scottish National Party (SNP) will discuss an independent Scotland using the euro if a vote to leave the European Union leads to the break-up of the United Kingdom: "The First Minister said it was not party policy to seek entry to the single currency if Scotland becomes independent, but the pound may not be "as attractive a currency" if it weakens after Brexit... she said her party would enter "decisions and discussions" over the euro if Britain pulls out of the EU against the will of a majority of Scots." (Daily Telegraph, 21 June 2016)

Conclusions

Splitting up is never an easy thing to do. Inevitably, it brings about insecurity and instability making both/all sides more vulnerable. However, when the differences become irreconcilable, it is better to do so. Where strife appears on ethnic lines and national groups demand autonomy or self-governance, one possible solution is to allow the formation of smaller units which can then cooperate with others within the larger trans-national entity.

The peaceful and amicable dissolution of Czechoslovakia can serve as a model for other similar contexts where communities that became part of a larger nation-state having unfulfilled national aspirations can achieve their goals. This is the case of Scotland as a part of the UK. This development seems not to be finished yet, though. British politics is renowned for embracing major political transformations through subtle changes rather than revolutionary shifts.

Countries´ splitting up essentially involves a certain degree of violence with the worst scenario of a civil war. In Czechoslovakia this was not the case. In hindsight, the relationships between the two nations (and states) have become even more cordial than ever after the split. The very fact that the common state was dissolved peacefully in the frame of two years bears resemblance to the scope of time given by the Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty on ending a country´s membership in the EU.

Once this Article is activated a period of long negotiations will commence. It is still unclear what and how big the disputes between the Scottish and the English (and Welsh) part of the country will be.

Undoubtedly, there will be some. Only time will tell what positive or negative lessons the British people will take from the dissolution of other countries in the past.

Being an unionist myself, I certainly would not wish to see the United Kingdom split into more states, however in case the Brexit implications result in irreconcilable differences between the two parts of Great Britain, I wish the British people a Czechoslovakia-like split.

Still, the question of the long-term geopolitical consequences for rather a small country being split into even smaller parts is a topic for another extensive discussion.

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